56 Modal verbs

Modal verbs are very common in English. They are used to talk about a variety of things, particularly possibilities, obligations, and deductions.

See also:

Present simple negative 2
Forming questions **34** Types of verbs **49**

56.1 USES OF MODAL VERBS

English has many modal verbs. Each modal verb can can be used in several different contexts.

ABILITY

I can speak three languages.

I can't read Latin because it's too difficult.
I couldn't study it when I was at school.



PERMISSION

You can have more cake if you want. You may take as much as you like. Could I have another slice of cake?



REQUESTS

Can / Could you give me a ride home later? Would you email James for me, please? Will you lock up the office tonight?



OFFERS

Can I help you with those?

May I take one of those for you?

Shall I carry some of your bags?



SUGGESTIONS AND ADVICE

You should / ought to go to the doctor. You could try the new medicine.



OBLIGATION

You must arrive on time for work. You must not be late for work.



LOGICAL DEDUCTIONS

It can't be Jane because she's on vacation.

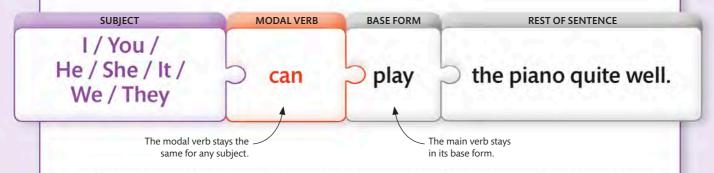
It could / might / may be Dave. I don't know.

It must be Tom, since nobody else ever calls.



56.2 MODAL VERB FORMATIONS

Modal verbs share certain characteristics. They don't change form to match the subject, and they are always followed by a main verb in its base form. Their question and negative forms are made without "do."



Negatives are formed by adding "not" between the modal verb and main verb.

You should run a marathon.



You should not run a marathon



Questions are usually formed by swapping the subject and the modal verb.

They should visit the castle.





"Ought to" and "have to" are exceptions because they use "to" before the base form. "Ought to" is a more formal way of saying "should," and "have to" means "must." They both act like normal verbs.

You {ought to have to learn how to drive.

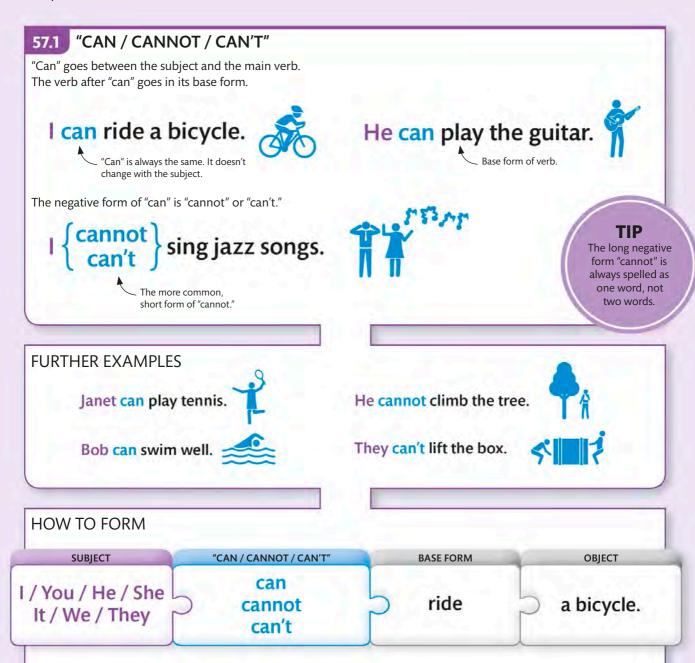


57 Ability

"Can" is a modal verb that describes what someone is able to do. It is used in different forms to describe past and present abilities.

See also:

Present simple 1
Future with "will" 18



57.2 "COULD" FOR PAST ABILITIES

"Could" is the past form of "can" and is used to talk about an ability in the past. "When" plus a time setting can be used to say when someone had the ability.





The time frame can be set with a phrase about an age, day, or year.

I can't climb trees now, but I could when I was younger.

Describes a present ability.

Describes a past ability.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

When I was a student, I could study all night before an exam.



When Milo was eight, he could play the violin.



I couldn't go to China last year

because it was too expensive.



Last year she couldn't run very far, but yesterday she ran a marathon.

legative form.



57.3 "CAN" IN THE FUTURE

It is not grammatically possible to talk about the future using "can." "Will be able to" is used instead.

At the moment, I can play the trombone quite well.



If I work harder, I will be able to play at concerts.

"Will can" is incorrect.

The negative is formed with "not able to" or "unable to."

Unfortunately, I can't read music very well.



f I don't learn, \[\left\{ \text{won't be able} \\ \text{will be unable} \\ \end{able} \] to join the orchestra.

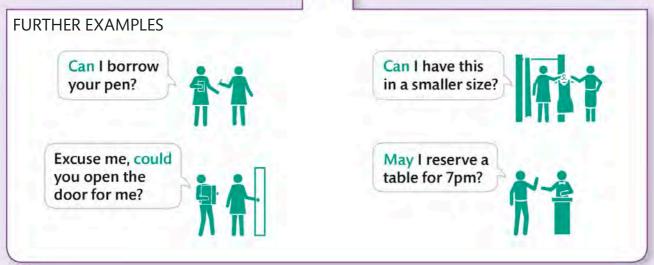
"Will be unable to" can also be used, but it's less common.

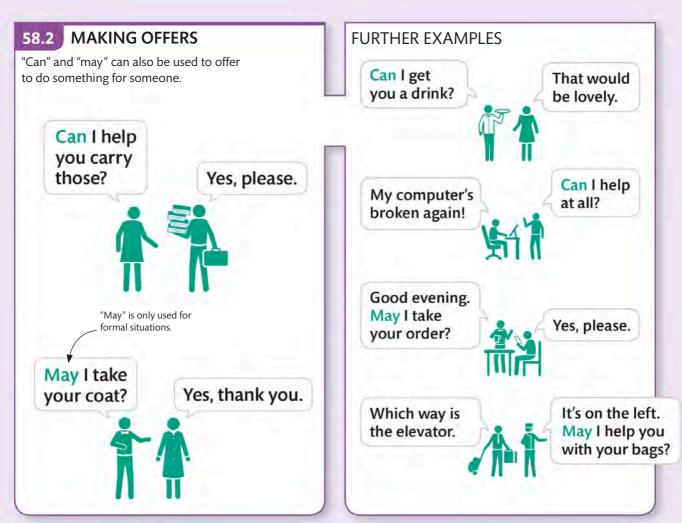
58 Permission, requests, and offers

"Can," "could," and "may" are used to ask permission to do something, or to ask someone to do something for you. They can also be used to offer to help someone.

See also:Types of verbs **49**Modal verbs **56**









59 Suggestions and advice

The modal verb "could" can be used to offer suggestions. "Could" is not as strong as "should." It communicates gentle advice.

See also:

Conditional sentences **29** Types of verbs **49** Modal verbs **56**

59.1 "SHOULD" FOR ADVICE

"Should" is used when the speaker wants to make a strong suggestion.

It's very sunny. You should wear a hat.

"Should" comes before the advice.



FURTHER EXAMPLES

It might rain. You should take your umbrella with you.



You're sick. I don't think you should go to work today.

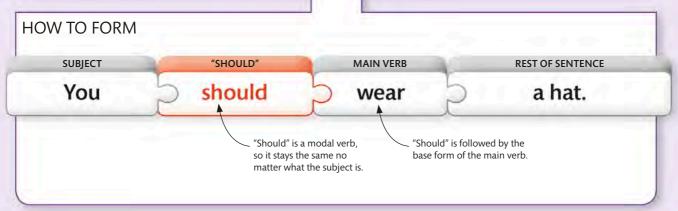


There's ice on the roads. You shouldn't drive tonight.



Which hat should I buy? They're all so cool.





59.2 "OUGHT TO" FOR ADVICE

"Ought to" is a more formal and less common way to say "should." It is not usually used in the negative or question forms.



should ought to wear a scarf. It's very cold outside.

"IF I WERE YOU"

English uses "if I were you" to give advice in second conditional sentences. The advice is expressed using "I would."

I don't know if I should take this job.



"was," in this context. If I were you, I would take it.

English uses "were," not

The advice comes after "I would

FURTHER EXAMPLES

I'm going to the concert tonight.



If I were you, I'd leave early. The traffic is awful.

The suggestion can come first without changing the meaning.

I think I'll buy this shirt.



I wouldn't buy it if I were you. I don't like the pattern.

There is no comma before "if."

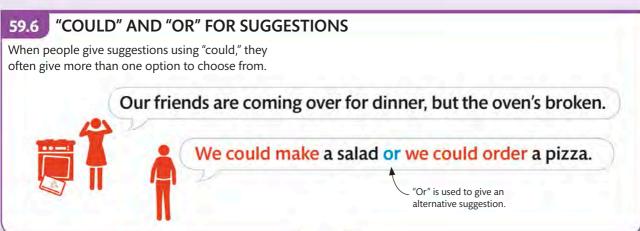
"HAD BETTER" 59.4

"Had better" can also be used to give very strong or urgent advice that can have a negative consequence if it is not followed.



leave for school! It's already 8.45.









60 Obligations

In English, "have to" or "must" are used when talking about obligations or things that are necessary. They are often used to give important instructions.

See also:

Future with "will" 18 Types of verbs 49 Modal verbs 56

60.1 **OBLIGATIONS**

"Must" and "have to" both express a strong need or obligation to do something.



"Must not" is a strong negative obligation. It means something is not allowed.



You must not get your bandage wet, or your leg might not heal properly.

"Don't have to" means something is not necessary, or there is no obligation.



You don't have to come again. Your leg is better.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

He must take two pills each morning and evening for the next two weeks.



She must not go back to work until her back is better.



Do I have to go back to the doctor again? I'm feeling so much better now.



HOW TO FORM

"Must" does not change with the subject, but "have to" becomes "has to" in the third person singular. Both forms are followed by the base form of the main verb.



Λ

COMMON MISTAKES "MUST NOT" AND "DON'T HAVE TO"

"Must not" and "don't have to" do not mean the same thing.

"Must not" is used to give an instruction that forbids someone from doing something. "Don't have to" is used to tell someone that it is not necessary that they do something.

You must not use a calculator during this exam.



[It is against the rules to use a calculator during this exam.]

You don't have to use a calculator, but it might be useful.

[You are allowed to use a calculator, but it is not required.]



60.2 "MUST" AND "HAVE TO" IN THE FUTURE

There is no future form of "must." The future of "have to" is formed with the auxiliary verb "will."

In some countries, people $\left\{\begin{array}{c} \text{must} \\ \text{have to} \end{array}\right\}$ recycle. It's the law.



In the future, I think everyone will have to recycle.

"Will must" is incorrect

"Must not" does not have a future form. "Don't have to" can be used in the future by changing "don't" to "will not" or "won't."

One day, I hope I will not have to work so hard.



60.3 "MUST" AND "HAVE TO" IN THE PAST

There is no past form of "must." The past tense of "have to" is used instead.

For most jobs, you $\left\{\begin{array}{c} \text{must} \\ \text{have to} \end{array}\right\}$ use a computer.

In the past, you didn't have to use a computer.



61 Making deductions

Modal verbs can also be used to talk about how likely or unlikely something is. They can be used to guess and make deductions about what has happened or is happening now.

See also:

Types of verbs **49**

Infinitives and participles 51 Modal verbs 56

61.1 SPECULATION AND DEDUCTION

The modal verbs "might" and "could" are used to talk about something with uncertainty.

"Might" and "could" can be used to talk about uncertainty.

John has a sore ankle. It $\left\{\begin{array}{c} mi \\ co. \end{array}\right\}$

could be brol

A

The modal verb doesn't change with the subject.

The modal verb is usually followed by the base form of the main verb.

"Might not" is used to describe negative things that are not certain.

It's not very swollen, so it might not be serious.

"Not" goes after the modal verb.



"Must" is often used to speculate about the present.

John must be very bored at home. He's usually so active.



"Cannot" and "can't" are used when someone is certain something is impossible.

John's leg $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} cannot \\ can't \end{array} \right\}$

be broken. He walked to the doctor.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

Fay's got a sore throat and isn't feeling well. She might have a cold.



I was so sick last week that I couldn't get out of bed.



My eyes are itchy and I have a runny nose. It could be hay fever.



I can't have the flu because I don't have a high temperature.

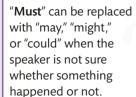


61.2 SPECULATION AND DEDUCTION ABOUT THE PAST

"Must have" with a past participle is used to speculate about the past when the speaker is sure something happened.

He just disappeared. Aliens must have taken him.

Past participle —



They might may

may have taken him to another planet.



"Can't" or "couldn't" can be used to refer to something that the speaker is certain did not happen.

It $\left\{\begin{array}{c} can't \\ couldn't \end{array}\right\}$ have been aliens, they don't exist.



FURTHER EXAMPLES



Bethan didn't return my call yesterday. She must have been busy.



She might have forgotten to call me back.



She might not have written down my number correctly.



Paula can't have been at the party last night, she was at work.



I didn't see who knocked on the door, but it may have been the mailman.



What happened to my vase? The cat must have knocked it over.

62 Possibility

Modal verbs can be used to talk about possibility, or to express uncertainty. "Might" is the most common modal verb used for this purpose.

See also:

Present simple 1 Infinitives and participles 51 Modal verbs 56



FURTHER EXAMPLES

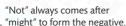
We might have taken a wrong turn at the river.



TIPQuestions with "might"

are only used in very formal English.

It might be windy at the top of the mountain.



Joe might not come walking with us next weekend





"MIGHT" WITH UNCERTAINTY

Other phrases can be added to sentences with "might" to emphasize uncertainty about something.



I might take the bus home. I'm not sure.

I don't know. I might have more pizza.



PAST POSSIBILITY

As well as "might," other modal verbs can be used to talk about something that possibly happened in the past.



The copier isn't working. It \begin{pmaight may may could \text{have run out of paper.} \text{



[He thinks it is possible that the copier has run out of paper.]

These constructions can be used to talk about something that possibly did not happen in the past.



You {might not may not have plugged it in correctly.

[He thinks it is possible that the printer wasn't plugged in correctly.]

"Could not" can only be used when the speaker is certain that something did not happen.



You couldn't have changed the ink correctly.

[He is certain that the ink wasn't changed correctly.]